



**“A genocide of little importance”:
the impact of the terminology
used by members of the French
government on the representation
of the 1994 Tutsi genocide in
Rwanda**

Abstract

In May 1994 France distinguished itself from other more reticent members of the international community by being the first country to explicitly identify the events occurring in Rwanda as a ‘genocide’. The present article elucidates the impact of the very particular ways in which key French government figures used the term ‘genocide’ to describe the Tutsi genocide in Rwanda both during and after the events of 1994.

Key words

genocide ; Rwanda ; France ; discourse analysis

“Dans ces pays-là, un génocide c’est pas trop important”
(François Mitterrand, summer 1994)

For Chantal Kalisa
(1965-2015)

6 April 1994 marked the beginning of the groundswell of violence in Rwanda that was carefully planned and orchestrated by Hutu

extremists and that sought to eradicate the Tutsi ethnic group (Des Forges, 1999, 7). However, the issue of whether this concerted aggression should be formally recognised as a ‘genocide’ was a deeply problematic question for the international community, extending far beyond the simple linguistic parameters of denotation. Both the UN and the USA, for example, were reticent to use this term in relation to Rwanda; for them, in the light of the UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (CPPCG), it carried if not an explicit legal obligation, then at the very least an implicit moral imperative to intervene, which they were unwilling to do (Prunier, 1995, 274; Des Forges, 1999, 7). The decision to use or not use the term ‘genocide’ within the context of Rwanda therefore carried particular significance. It was in fact France that was the first country to publicly describe the events unfolding in Rwanda as a ‘génocide’ in a press statement by the then Minister for Foreign Affairs, Alain Juppé, in May 1994. This article will seek to elucidate both the manner in which this term has been used by various members of the French government, and the repercussions on the way in which the events in Rwanda were represented within the French-speaking community.

Amidst the considerable body of literature that has already been published on the genocide in Rwanda, several monographs have explored the controversial question of the extent of France’s direct involvement in the preparation, execution and immediate aftermath of the genocide (see for example Saint-Exupéry, 2004; Gouteux, 2005; Pradelle, 2005; Wallis, 2006; Morel, 2010). Of particular note are accusations of complicity by French soldiers in the killing of Tutsis at Bisesero (see Wallis, 2006, 146-156) and the way the French ‘humanitarian’ mission known as Opération Turquoise, which was deployed from June 1994, was used to shield genocide perpetrators from the advancing Tutsi forces of the Front Patriotique Rwandais (FPR) (Des Forges, 1999, 492). The main focus of the existing research on France’s involvement has therefore been to acquire a deeper understanding of the actions implemented by the French

authorities in Rwanda; the present article seeks to contribute a complementary analysis by focussing on the language used by key figures in the French government of that time. This is an area that has so far attracted only limited critical attention (see Doridant and Lacoste, 2014); however, it can provide valuable insight into how perceptions of the genocide can be influenced – and in some cases deliberately manipulated – by the language used to describe it.

The analysis presented in this article is informed by Discourse Analysis, which identifies the importance of interpreting language not simply in terms of its own internal grammatical structures, but by also taking into account the social and cultural context in which it is produced (Fairclough, 2001, 2003). The discussion in this paper is grounded in tangible lexical and grammatical data, with the focus being on the use of the key term of ‘génocide’ and the context within which it was produced and disseminated.

‘Genocide’ was a neologism coined in 1944 by the Polish Jewish lawyer Rafael Lemkin, who had been working since the 1930s towards the formulation of a law to punish those persons found guilty of implementing the destruction of a people. (King, 2007, 29-35) In 1948 the UN adopted the Genocide Convention cited above, where the term is defined as those acts “committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group” (Convention, 1948, Art. 2). Thus, the actions constituting genocide are considered to be unidirectional: even if the intended victims retaliate with significant force or success, if there is not the deliberate intent to destroy on their side, their actions cannot be classed as ‘genocide’. ‘Genocide’ can therefore be clearly distinguished from other terms such as ‘conflict’, ‘combat’, ‘(civil) war’ etc., which convey a reciprocity of aggression between two opposing sides, and where the underlying intent is most often the desire for supremacy in some regard, rather than the desire to destroy. An exhaustive quantitative and qualitative study of the use of these various terms in evocations of the genocide in Rwanda, and particularly their use by the French authorities, would be a valuable

extension of the initial observations presented in the following pages, however such an ambitious undertaking is outside the scope of this article.

Before examining the specific instances of the use of the term ‘génocide’ in 1994 by members of the then French government, it is important to briefly evoke the broader historical context of Franco-Rwandese relations, where the question of language looms large. France’s socio-political links with Rwanda began in the early 1960s, when President Charles de Gaulle agreed to provide assistance to the new Republic “au nom de la défense de la francophonie” (*Mission*, 1998, 31). During the 1970s and especially following the coup d’Etat which brought the Hutu leader Juvénal Habyarimana to power in Rwanda in 1973, France’s involvement in the African country significantly increased, particularly in the area of military aid. This evolution can be seen as a logical amplification of France’s earlier commitment to defend and promote *la francophonie*, with the notion of ‘defence’ moving from the realm of a pure concept to that of actual practical support. In this connection, it is significant that both the French government’s own *Mission d’information sur le Rwanda* (1998) and the Rwandan government’s *Rapport Mucyo* (2007), each of which addresses the issue of France’s involvement in Rwanda before and during the genocide, describe France’s foreign policy of the 1970s and 1980s in a manner suggestive of a neo-colonialist discourse:

(...) la France élabore une vision géopolitique claire qui se fonde alors sur la conviction selon laquelle les Américains prennent une position importante en Afrique francophone, et qu’il faut consolider la francophonie pour contrecarrer cette influence rivale. (*Rapport Mucyo*, 2007, 16)

The degree of importance accorded to this politicolinguistic rivalry within the French government sphere should not be underestimated; as the *Mission d’information* mentions, the antagonism towards the

USA led to Rwanda being viewed as part of a “ligne Maginot linguistique” (1998, 31-32). The use of this metaphor stemming from the armed conflict of the early 20th century opposing long-term rivals France and Germany is firstly highly significant as an indicator of Rwanda’s strategic importance for France. At the same time, through its historical connotations, it also established a foundation for the elaboration of a discourse where the French could present themselves as being morally justified to ‘defend’ the French-speakers within Rwanda from the ‘assaults’, ‘incursions’ and ‘attacks’ mounted by English-speakers identified as enemies of the incumbent Hutu regime, such as the Tutsi exiles living in neighbouring Uganda, who may have sought to cross this new Maginot line and ‘invade’ the country. (Des Forges, 1999, 48-51; *Rwanda*, 2012, 272)

Following the outbreak of genocide on 6 April 1994, the French Minister for Foreign Affairs, Alain Juppé was the first official of any government, as mentioned above, to publicly characterise the events occurring in Rwanda as ‘génocide’ in a declaration to the press made on 15 May after a meeting in Brussels. The apparent absence of any consultable recording or transcription of his speech means that the most detailed information available on its contents appears in the summary given in the *Mission d’information*, where it is presented in the following terms:

Sur le plan diplomatique, la France est le premier pays, le 15 mai, à avoir qualifié le drame de génocide en même temps qu’elle a condamné les massacres perpétrés tant par les milices Interahamwe que par le FPR. (1998, 314)

Syntactically, this sentence establishes an equation between two sets of events which were separate, but which here are implicitly conflated; in other words, given that ‘génocide’ and ‘massacres’ are mentioned in the same sentence, a logical assumption would be that the two are related in some way. However, the term ‘génocide’ relates

to the campaign of destruction perpetrated by Hutu extremists against the Tutsis (April–July 1994), whereas the ‘massacres’ appear to reference the civil war between Hutus and Tutsis that played out in two phases: October 1990–August 1993 and April–July 1994. (Prunier, 1995) The situation on the ground in Rwanda in 1994 was certainly complex; however, I would argue that it is significant that Juppé’s representation of the events does not clearly identify the perpetrators and victims of the ‘génocide’ he is so proud to have named; rather, the use of the construction ‘tant...que’ grammatically reinforces the idea of an equality of responsibility between the two ethnic groups for the killings taking place.

Subsequent uses of term ‘génocide’ by Juppé reveal the same trend of blurring the lines between genocide and ethnic conflict/civil war through his lexical and syntactical choices. On 18 May 1994, for example, a few days after his statement in Brussels, Juppé responded to a question in the French parliament regarding the situation in Rwanda in the following terms:

Destruction systématique d’un groupe ethnique, telle est la définition du génocide. C’est la raison pour laquelle, tout comme vous, monsieur Million, j’ai moi-même utilisé ce terme il y a quelques jours, puisque c’est bien de cela qu’il s’agit au Rwanda. Face à l’offensive du Front patriotique rwandais, les troupes gouvernementales rwandaises se sont livrées à une élimination systématique de la population tutsie, ce qui a provoqué ensuite la généralisation des massacres. La France a dénoncé avec la plus grande fermeté cette situation. (Morel, 2010, 731)

Juppé explicitly and erroneously reframes the genocide of the Tutsis, which was a programme of destruction that had been carefully planned for several years, within the parameters of a response to an offensive launched by the FPR, thereby effectively portraying the latter as instigators of the violence suffered by their fellow Tutsis. In

fact, the massacres by Hutu extremists began during the night of 6 to 7 April, and there were no attacks by the FPR immediately prior to this date, despite inflammatory claims to this effect by the so-called 'hate radio', Radio 'Télévision Libre des Mille Collines' (Morel, 2010, 668, 731; Des Forges, 1999, 130). However, even more significant is the continuation of that same sentence, evoking the 'généralisation des massacres'. As in the example discussed above, there is a clear connotative displacement from the concept of genocide to that of armed conflict, and moreover a conflict where the distinction between aggressor and victim appears to have been consciously blurred.

The fact that this tendency towards obfuscation was shared by other members of the French government, rather than being simply attributable to the personal rhetoric of Alain Juppé, can be seen from the contents of a radio interview given a few days later on 24 May 1994 by junior Health Minister Philippe Douste-Blazy, who was on a humanitarian mission in the Great Lakes region of East Africa:

Dousté-Blazy : Nous sommes devant le plus grand massacre de la fin du vingtième siècle. Il y a entre 200 000 et 500 000 morts, 2 millions de réfugiés et des centaines de gens qui passent tous les jours la frontière... C'est terrible. **C'est un vrai génocide.** On a tué délibérément, non seulement les adultes, mais aussi les enfants, y compris les nourrissons... [...]

Info-Matin : **Vous avez parlé de génocide. S'agit-il du génocide des Tutsis par les Hutus ou bien y a-t-il eu massacres des deux côtés ?**

Dousté-Blazy : **Cela n'est pas à moi de prendre parti.** Mais il faut vraiment que la Commission des droits de l'homme des Nations unies, qui se réunit spécialement mardi, montre du doigt **les coupables.** (Morel, 2010, 732) [author's highlighting]

Once again, the Minister shows no hesitation in stating categorically that the events in Rwanda are a ‘vrai génocide’. However, this strong statement is immediately followed by an obvious reticence to confirm the identity of the genocide perpetrators, or to contradict or clarify the notion of massacres committed by both sides which is introduced by the interviewer’s question. The motivation for Douste-Blazy’s response appears to be above all to leave the listener with an impression of France’s impartiality with regard to the conflict in Rwanda, while at the same time expressing justifiable concern – ‘C’est terrible’ – from a fundamental humanitarian perspective. However, the Minister’s interview can also be seen as a public statement which effectively sidesteps the issue of who exactly are ‘les coupables’ responsible for carrying out the extermination.

The French government that was in power in 1994 was a government of ‘cohabitation’, with a socialist President François Mitterrand and a right-wing government under Prime Minister Edouard Balladur. Despite being nicknamed the “cohabitation de velours” because of the generally smooth relations that predominated, there were nevertheless some instances of friction and one-upmanship. With regard to the genocide in Rwanda, for example, it was on Mitterrand’s initiative that the French Cabinet made the decision on 14 June to deploy Opération Turquoise, however Juppé disregarded the President’s request to not immediately communicate that decision and stole the President’s thunder by making a public announcement in both televised and printed media that France would intervene in Rwanda (Wallis, 2006, 122-123).

The French government’s motivation at this point is described in scathing terms by French historian Gérard Prunier, who published – firstly in English – one of the earliest monographs on the genocide in Rwanda: “The idea looked good in the context of internal French politics. [...] In other words, Rwanda and its chopped-up babies now looked as if they could give good political mileage in terms of public opinion ratings.” (1995, 282) Alain Juppé’s article entitled ‘Intervenir au Rwanda’ was published in the French newspaper

Libération on 16 June 1994. The principal purpose of this article was clearly to ‘sell’ the idea of France’s intervention in Rwanda to the French people, and the article details the extensive positive contributions to that country made by the French government in the recent past, particularly in relation to the pursuit of a peaceful power-sharing agreement and the provision of humanitarian aid. The term ‘génocide’ is used only twice, once towards the beginning of the article and once towards the end. The first occurrence mirrors the same progression of ideas discussed above with regard to Juppé’s comments in the French parliament: “Il faut parler de génocide, car il y a bien volonté délibérée [...] d’abattre les Tutsis [...]. Mais dans le même temps se livre une lutte sans merci pour le pouvoir” (para. 3). The evocation of a ‘lutte sans merci’ placed in parallel with ‘génocide’ effectively weakens the force of the latter term by immediately shifting the reader’s attention from the notion of a crime against humanity to the notion of armed conflict. In this connection, it is significant that in the body of the article, the most recurrent concepts, which arguably would therefore have the greatest impact on the reader, relate to three key notions: that of two opposing groups (six occurrences) e.g. “ceux qui dans chacun des camps rêvent de pouvoir gouverner seul” (para. 5); that of the long-standing ethnic differences/tensions (five occurrences) e.g. “Après des années de tensions ethniques” (para. 2); and that of extensive killing on the ground constituting massacres (five occurrences) e.g. “Il n’est plus temps de déplorer les massacres les bras croisés” (para. 11). The accumulation of these terms builds up an overall picture of a violent conflict between two opposing ethnic groups. This also can be seen as preparing the ground for the manner in which the term ‘génocide’ is used for a second time towards the end of the article:

La France n’aura aucune complaisance à l’égard **des assassins**.
La France, seul pays occidental représenté au niveau
ministériel à la session extraordinaire de la Commission des

droits de l'homme à Genève, exige que **les responsables de ces génocides** soient jugés. (para. 10). [author's highlighting]

From a grammatical perspective, the accumulation of plural nouns in this sentence reinforces the notion of a multiplicity of unidentified aggressors, rather than a clear distinction between genocide perpetrators and targeted victims. Juppé's use of the term 'génocide' in the plural at the end of this article constitutes a semantic shift that aligns it much more closely to the connotations of a 'massacre', i.e. the indiscriminate slaughter of many people. This rhetorical strategy is therefore significant because it uses 'génocide' in a way that would appear to minimise the core component of 'intent to destroy a particular group' by reframing the events occurring in Rwanda as a particularly violent conflict, rather than a unidirectional campaign of extermination.

Alain Juppé's article constitutes a very rich text which deserves more extensive analysis than can be afforded within the limits of the present discussion. However, a feature of Juppé's language which is particularly noteworthy is how specific terms are chosen to convey not only their superficial meaning, but often – and more importantly – their implied meaning. For example, Juppé readily admits that France is guilty with regard to Rwanda because, like other countries in the international community, France can rightly be accused of a "passivité coupable" (para 4). Thus, by implication, if France has indeed been passive, this logically precludes it from having had any *active* involvement in the situation in Rwanda, as the two concepts are mutually exclusive. Similarly, with regard to his use of the term 'génocide' in this article and elsewhere, I would argue that Juppé was very much aware of the broader implications associated with using this term, particularly with regard to how the person using it would be perceived by third parties. Mention has been made above of how the moral implications with which the term was imbued provoked an extreme reticence on the part of the UN and the USA to adopt it; this led the latter to engage in bizarre lexical gymnastics,

with the US government only acknowledging “acts of genocide” in Rwanda (*Frontline*). However, from Juppé’s perspective, these same connotations would constitute a compelling argument in their own right in defence of France’s moral position with regard to Rwanda: in other words, how could France possibly be accused of complicity, or indeed any involvement whatsoever in the genocide, when it was the first country which had the courage to explicitly use this highly significant term? This perspective is illustrated by a conversation between Alain Juppé and the French philosopher and public figure Bernard-Henri Lévy, which is documented in an article published in 2011 by the human rights organisation Survie France:

Alain Juppé reprochant à Bernard-Henri Lévy, dans l’avion présidentiel de retour du voyage officiel en Libye : “*Vous avez dit que j’étais complice des génocidaires du Rwanda. Alors que, sortant d’une réunion des ministres européens en 1994, j’avais déclaré que c’était un génocide*”. L’argument est court, très court pour sa défense. (*Rwanda*, 2011)

In summary, Juppé’s use of the term ‘génocide’ in both its singular and plural form can be seen as an example of the deliberate manipulation of language to further the interests of the French government. Firstly, it implicitly established France’s laudable moral position as one of condemning the genocide that, at the time, it alone dared to name. Secondly, it subtly reconfigured the representation of the events on the ground as a reciprocal exercise in mass killings, rather than as the clear implementation of a genocidal agenda targeting the Tutsis. This was of crucial importance for the French authorities, especially in the light of the evidence of the military and logistical support which they had provided to the successive Hutu governments in Rwanda before and during the genocide (*Mission*, 1998, 184-5; Des Forges, 1999, 92-94); support which France was later to address in its *Mission d’information* under the euphemistic heading of “des erreurs d’appréciation”. (1998, 11)

When the genocide began in Rwanda in April 1994, François Mitterrand had been president of France for thirteen years; during his two terms in office he took a very close personal interest in France's presence and influence on the African continent. In this connection, the appointment of his son Jean-Christophe as head of the African bureau was justifiably interpreted as a tokenistic appointment to facilitate the President's own direct control of government policy; this led to Jean-Christophe being nicknamed 'Papamadit' by African politicians, as he was so obviously his father's mouthpiece. (Doray, 2002) In examining the language used by François Mitterrand in relation to Rwanda, this keenness to directly influence France's official involvement in African matters would suggest that any comment made by the President, whether in a public or private context, is worthy of note. In the summer of 1994, Mitterrand made an informal remark in relation to Rwanda which was quoted at the beginning of this article: "Dans ces pays-là un génocide, c'est pas trop important." This was reported by the journalist Patrick de Saint-Exupéry in the national French newspaper *Le Figaro* on 12 January 1998, and has frequently been cited in studies criticising France's involvement, even inspiring the title of a monograph on this subject (Gouteux, 2001). The context in which this statement was made was that of a private conversation with colleagues, therefore undoubtedly without the expectation that it would be disseminated in broader circles. Its relaxed conversational register and syntax enhance the impression of a personal, unguarded comment. Its immediate impact is disturbing because it articulates a clear distinction between the value of human life in 'those countries', as compared to developed nations. However, it is also significant from a lexical perspective, in that it constitutes a further example of the banalisation of the term 'génocide' by its syntactical juxtaposition with an offhand phrase "c'est pas trop important" that effectively detracts from its full semantic value.

This was far from being an isolated and potentially misquoted statement: Mitterrand expressed very similar views on two other

occasions in 1994. At the Franco-German summit in Mulhouse on 31 May, he commented to the German Chancellor Helmut Kohl: “On nous a accusé d’avoir soutenu le régime précédent. On a un récit unilatéral du massacre. La réalité est que tout le monde tue tout le monde.” (Morel, 2010, 724). The terminology used here is particularly striking, especially given its close chronological proximity to Juppé’s official acknowledgement of ‘génocide’ in Rwanda on 15 May. Mitterrand uses ‘massacre’ rather than ‘génocide’ and contrasts the subjectivity of what he deems to be a ‘récit unilatéral’, the one-sided *story* that has been told, with what he regards as the *reality* of the situation. Significantly, the strategy used by Mitterrand in these three short sentences to defuse accusations of complicity in genocide on the part of the French government is to represent the situation in Rwanda as generalised massacres. From that perspective, supporting one side or another would therefore not carry any particular moral overtones, and could be sociopolitically justifiable from the perspective of defending the interests of la francophonie: “une victoire du FPR est contraire à l’intérêt de l’ensemble francophone” (*Rwanda*, 2012, 388).

The second example relates to another evocation of the term ‘génocide’, which was used during a speech delivered by Mitterrand at the 18th Franco-African summit in Biarritz in November 1994. The oral version of the speech contained the term ‘génocide’ in the singular, but in the written version it appeared in the inhabitual plural form, ‘génocides’. Patrick de Saint-Exupéry questioned the discrepancy at a press conference in Biarritz, provoking a strong reaction from the President: “le génocide ou les génocides?! Dans ces pays-là on a toujours tué, les massacres ce n’est pas nouveau.” (Saint-Exupéry, 2004, 18-20). This recurrence of the term in the plural echoes Alain Juppé’s use of the plural in the *Libération* article discussed above, suggesting that this lexical variation may well have acquired the status of standard terminology in French government circles. Once again, in this example, the use of the plural appears as an effective strategy to dilute the original denotational value of the

term ‘génocide’ to make it more synonymous with the notion of ‘heavy conflict and extensive loss of life’, thereby removing the key defining factor of deliberate intent to exterminate a target group.

In subsequent years, the longevity of the plural form among French government officials is attested by a noteworthy example that occurred in 2003 in a radio interview given by the then Minister for Foreign Affairs, Dominique de Villepin: “Prenons le cas du Rwanda où 80 % des Rwandais ont été amenés à élire leur chef d’Etat. C’est la première élection, moins de dix ans après les terribles génocides qui ont frappé le Rwanda.” (*Interview*). These words provoked a strong reaction from Patrick de Saint-Exupéry, the same journalist who had questioned Mitterrand in Biarritz. In a monograph on France’s involvement in Rwanda published in the following year, he extensively criticised the Minister for perpetuating Mitterrand’s legacy with regard to Rwanda and for espousing “une logique de négation” (2004, 15).

In the 21st century there has been a distinct shift with regard to how the term ‘génocide’ has been used by members of the French government. After the breakdown of diplomatic relations between France and Rwanda in 2006, the official visit to Rwanda by President Nicolas Sarkozy in 2010 constituted an important step towards reconciliation between the two countries. This was reflected in the language used by the French President during the joint press conference with the Rwandan President Paul Kagame, where ‘génocide’ was once again used in its original singular form: “Nous souhaitons que les responsables du génocide soient retrouvés et soient punis. Est-ce qu’il y en a en France? C’est à la justice de le dire” (*Conférence de presse*, 2010). However, even though the use of the singular term appears less encumbered by an underlying agenda than the examples discussed earlier in this article, the fact that Sarkozy then asks the rhetorical question of whether any genocide perpetrators are located in France, when there is absolutely no doubt as to the veracity of that statement, creates the impression that the French government is still far from ready to fully acknowledge the

extent of its involvement in the 1994 genocide in Rwanda.

As this article has briefly demonstrated in its examination of the use of the term ‘génocide’ by key French government members during and following the events of 1994 in Rwanda, far from being a matter of “little importance”, the genocide committed against the Tutsi has in fact had far-reaching repercussions, not least of all for France, which some twenty years later is still being called to account in relation to its role in the genocide. The enduring relevance of this issue has been further confirmed by the considerable interest shown in the recent release into the public domain of hitherto classified documents on Rwanda from the French government archives (“L’Élysée”). The above discussion has given some indication of the complexity underpinning the lexical and syntactical choices in evocations of the term ‘génocide’ with regard to the 1994 Tutsi genocide, particularly in cases where the usage adopted by the respective speakers appears more suggestive of persuasion or manipulation rather than simple denotation. A more extensive study of the language used by French government members would therefore make a significant contribution to the “transparency” recently advocated by President Hollande (“L’Élysée”), thereby laying important groundwork for an effective and enduring reconciliation between the two countries.

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